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Conference Synopsis: The End of biodeterminism? New Directions for Medical Anthropology

(<http://somatosphere.net/2014/10/end-of-biodeterminism.html>)

By Samuel Taylor-Alexander (<http://somatosphere.net/author/samuel-taylor-alexander>)



(<http://epicenter.au.dk/biodeterminism/>)

What is biodeterminism? Has it ended and did it ever exist? Earlier this month at Aarhus University, these seemingly straightforward questions resulted in three days of fascinating conversation during a conference titled “The End of biodeterminism? New Directions for Medical Anthropology.” (<http://epicenter.au.dk/biodeterminism/>) The event, co-organized by the Centre for Cultural Epidemics (EPICENTER) (<http://epicenter.au.dk/>), the Interacting Minds Centre for the Study of Cognition (<http://interactingminds.au.dk/>), and the Department of Culture and Society (<http://cas.au.dk/en/>), entailed a rethinking of the ends of not only genetic determinism but also the human body itself. In a series of three thematic sessions that covered topics ranging from a new meditation/MRI nexus to epigenetics, and PTSD/Ugandan ghosts, the invited speakers engaged the indeterminacy of contemporary technomedicine to raise new conceptual and methodological problems for anthropology. From the opening paper by Margaret Lock (<http://www.mcgill.ca/ssom/facultyinfo/lock>) who spoke of

the “miniaturisation” of the “environment” in molecular epigenetics through to [Mette N. Svendsen](http://publichealth.ku.dk/staff/?pure=en/persons/124145) (<http://publichealth.ku.dk/staff/?pure=en/persons/124145>)’s multispecies ethnography where research piglets are configured as sacrificial subjects, numerous questions were opened up about the plural ends of multivariate determinisms. Further, the likes of [Allan Young](http://www.mcgill.ca/ssom/facultyinfo/young) (<http://www.mcgill.ca/ssom/facultyinfo/young>)’s intriguing anthropology of bacteria asked us to once again question the human self and its endpoints. As Young described to the audience how bacteria have become social, he also altered us to their significance in the constitution of our biological selves.

A refiguring of the biological and social nexus provided a key a conceptual tool for presenters. As they opened and closed the space between the two domains and brought in material and environmental factors, they showed how anthropology could contribute to emerging trends in science. [David Napier](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/people/academic_staff/d_napier) (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/people/academic_staff/d_napier) suggested that a possible avenue to do this was by “redefining sociobiology as the impact of social practices on biological mechanisms” as a way to elucidate the “syndemic and symbiotic nature of human practices” and their historical transformations. [Daniel Lende](http://anthropology.usf.edu/faculty/dlende/) (<http://anthropology.usf.edu/faculty/dlende/>) provided a neuroanthropology of addiction that recast the “addiction is a brain disease” paradigm. Drawing on his informants’ embodied experiences of a “high” and situating drug use in the lifeworld of the user to inform the sciences of addiction, Lende proposed a more grounded and local approach to combating drug abuse. [Des Fitzgerald](https://kcl.academia.edu/DesFitzgerald) (<https://kcl.academia.edu/DesFitzgerald>) spoke about stress in the neurological city post-determinism by telling us how “recent epigenetic and neurodevelopmental attention to the nexus of metropolitan and mental life has significantly re-animated, and torqued” the connection between stress and urban life. Again, produced within this research are oft hidden notions of responsibility that require social scientists to engage with the fluid rights of urban citizens as they are molded to and with urban space itself.

Emerging early was a debate about the ability of anthropology and the social sciences to intervene, to produce experimental modes of collaboration that will themselves act *as critique*. Should we design new forms of interdisciplinary collaboration in order to inform and influence scientific practice? What would be the benefits and limitations of such projects? In his presentation on “co-laborative ontography,” [Jörg Niewöhner](https://www.euroethno.hu-berlin.de/institut/personen/niewoehner) (<https://www.euroethno.hu-berlin.de/institut/personen/niewoehner>) suggested that social scientists should abandon criticism from afar in favor of an integrative form of investigation that introduces anthropological insights *into* molecular biology research. Discussion reminded us that in order for a middle ground to be forged it is necessary first to map out the landscape that is obscured and obfuscated by scientific reductionism. In both his closing remarks and his paper on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and their MRI measurements, conference organizer [Andreas Roepstorff](http://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/id%289b7e5ea3-9053-4c35-b321-9fb49342b294%29.html) (<http://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/id%289b7e5ea3-9053-4c35-b321-9fb49342b294%29.html>) reminded us that the language and methods of

science remain central to institutional modes of understanding the world; the quantification of emerging treatments that may otherwise contravene established biomedical approaches to illness allows them, and the measurement of nature, to remain within the domain of science.

Above and beyond the topic of “biodeterminism” a number of talks examined the epistemic and practical suffocation resulting from deterministic projections in science and public policy. Offering the notion of horizons, [Adriana Petryna](https://www.sas.upenn.edu/anthropology/people/petryna) (<https://www.sas.upenn.edu/anthropology/people/petryna>) discussed how scientists are “quantifying points of no return for ecosystems under threat” and how these points are perpetually refigured as new understandings of environmental complexity are introduced into scientific models. In the realm of global public health as [Susan L. Erikson](http://www.socanth.sfu.ca/people/susan_erikson/) (http://www.socanth.sfu.ca/people/susan_erikson/) explained, social determinants of health “distract attention away from the new ways commodifying health makes money and alters health services-scapes.” Using ethnographic insights from India to forge an analysis that moved between how “bacteria get ill,” drug resistant tuberculosis, and WHO-promoted treatment models, [Jens Seeberg](http://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/jens-seeberg%28417d506f-2634-40e0-81e4-799acce9238b%29.html) (<http://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/jens-seeberg%28417d506f-2634-40e0-81e4-799acce9238b%29.html>) showed how a TB treatment strategy can be a double-edged sword. While the Directly Observed Treatment – Short-course (DOTS) has improved treatment, it has stumbled when it comes to preventing drug resistance in both public and private healthcare systems.

The final themed panel on “Epidemics – communicability and non-communicability” turned the notion of contagion on its head. Non-communicable diseases like diabetes ([Steve Ferzacca](http://www.steveferzacca.com/page-1) (<http://www.steveferzacca.com/page-1>)), obesity ([Simon Cohn](http://www.lshtm.ac.uk/aboutus/people/cohn.simon) (<http://www.lshtm.ac.uk/aboutus/people/cohn.simon>)), and PTSD/Ghosts in Uganda ([Lotte Meinert](http://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/lotte-meinert%2813b81c44-51ee-4c50-94f6-e53ccb77cdda%29.html) (<http://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/lotte-meinert%2813b81c44-51ee-4c50-94f6-e53ccb77cdda%29.html>) and [Susan R. Whyte](http://research.ku.dk/search/?pure=en/persons/21339) (<http://research.ku.dk/search/?pure=en/persons/21339>)) and were examined as infectious and transmittable, challenging again the value of deterministic labeling and pondering new ways to understand illness and the body in the global health-scape. Moreover, the conference speakers emphasized that deterministic thinking reifies dominant logics and closes down the ability to imagine modes of intervention for potentially solvable problems.

A number of times throughout the meeting, organizers and presenters noted how indeterminacy had shaped both the logistical and topical elements of the meeting. Everyone involved in presenting and organizing was taken aback by the interest that the conference attracted; talks were transformed at the last minute into presentations. Similarly, there was sometimes uncertainty surrounding the connection between topics and conference themes, but this indeterminacy was perhaps what was most productive. It allowed for a time of collaboration and conceptual experimentation that demonstrated the import

of the topic and the ability of the social sciences to influence the determinisms – social, biological, environmental – emerging within contemporary scientific and policy practice.

The list of abstracts for all of the fifteen presentations is available online at <http://epicenter.au.dk/biodeterminism/abstracts/> (<http://epicenter.au.dk/biodeterminism/abstracts/>)

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Bio-ethnography, a view from philosophy (<http://somatosphere.net/2015/03/bio-ethnography-a-view-from-philosophy.html>)

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